

1-30-2015

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Recommended Citation

Bernardini, Craig (2015) "The Death of the Pianist," *Booth*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol7/iss1/5>

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The Death of the Pianist

Abstract

The lights dimmed, the stage door was cracked and then swung wide, and the pianist shuffled out, bent slightly forward, arms pumping. He was the sinker on a plumb line drawn by the gravity of the applause. As if its patter were the aural manifestation of that force, like the crackling of an electrical wire.

He offered a series of furtive bows, each little more than a nod, to different sections of the audience. He was as stiff as a bird, and nearly as devoid of expression. No fiddling with the height or distance of the piano bench, no tossing of his coattails; the heroic opening chords of the Hammerklavier rang out in the auditorium before the applause had a chance to die down.

Cover Page Footnote

The Death of the Pianist was originally published at



January 30, 2015

The Death of the Pianist

Fiction by Craig Bernardini

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I wanted to remark to the woman sitting next to me that the pianist was identical to my uncle, who in turn resembled my grandfather more than did my father, who resembled me. But her gaze was already fixed through her opera glasses. Beside her, her husband appeared to sleep.

Less than a minute later the stage door opened again, and a second pianist appeared, walking with the same stoop-shouldered gait as the first and looking just as much like my uncle.

This pianist made a beeline for the piano.

Excluding his dress, manner of walking, and resemblance to my uncle, I had no evidence as yet that the second figure was a pianist. He might have been a tenor. It would of course have been highly irregular for a soloist to appear unannounced at this stage in the performance. It occurred to me, too, that the *Hammerklavier*, as the name indicates, is a sonata for unaccompanied pianoforte. But perhaps it was a surprise, a celebration. A birthday.

The second pianist stopped a few feet behind the first, drew a pistol from his tuxedo jacket, and fired two shots in rapid succession into the first pianist's back.

The first pianist played until the instant the first bullet struck. Then he raised both hands high above the keyboard in the sort of gesture one expects to fill a caesura. With the second bullet his face contorted, as if he had forgotten to emote, and he collapsed forward onto the keyboard.

Together with the echo of the shots, that final, profoundly mysterious chord resonated through the auditorium, until the assassin of the first pianist took the corpse by one wrist and, with a brief glissando, tugged it over the far edge of the bench.

The corpse lay with its back to us while the assassin returned the pistol to his jacket pocket and stood facing the crowd between the bench and the keyboard, one hand resting on the instrument. Even from the balcony I could see the holes in the tuxedo jacket.

The second pianist delivered a series of crisp bows before sitting. There was a smattering of applause, and some coughing and rustling, and a loud shush from an offended patron. For the second pianist had, like the first, begun playing before the noise had settled: the *Hammerklavier* again, from precisely the point where the first pianist had left off.

My ears were still ringing from the shots, and I remarked mentally how startling was the sound of a pistol fired in a place built to catch the faintest whisper. But as the ringing faded, so did my memory of the event, and with the exception of the body on the stage it was soon possible to believe that the sonata had never been interrupted.

Some minutes later the second pianist finished the first movement and, with hardly a breath, plunged into the jaunty scherzo. I could hear him humming in a light monotone under his breath.

A third pianist appeared, with an identical shuffling gait to the first two, and looking just as much like my uncle. He moved with the same steadfastness of purpose as the second.

This time, an older gentleman in the first few rows stood and shouted something at the second pianist, but he was roundly booed and shushed by other audience members in his vicinity, and by one in mine, and with a dismissive wave of his hand he resumed his seat.

The second pianist was too immersed in the intricacies of the scherzo to notice either the audience member or the third pianist, the second assassin. I braced for the shot, though I refused to plug my ears.

The third pianist dispatched the second with a single shot to the back of the head.

On receiving the bullet, the second pianist pitched forward. His head ricocheted off the instrument, and as he was flung backward his knees caught on the underside of the keyboard so that, a moment later, his body hung suspended across the bench, back arched, arms thrown back, head nearly touching the stage, like a backstroker trapped in mid-start.

The piano had never looked so much like an instrument of torture.

From the stage door there emerged two new players: an usher in a bright red tux, and a lank, white-haired man in regular business attire.

The usher, who was bulky and a head taller than either of the other two, occupied himself with the bodies while the third pianist smoked—he had exchanged his pistol for a cigarette case immediately after the murder. The other man, whom I imagined to be an undertaker, looked on.

Because the bullet had refracted off the second pianist's skull into the soundboard, or because pieces of the skull had been ejected into the cabling, or because of the force with which the shattered remains of the second pianist's head had been catapulted into the keyboard—whatever the reason, or for all three, the piano hummed uncannily, as if the ghost of the second pianist refused to remove its fingers from the keys, daring us to applaud before the last trace of sound had faded.

But applaud we did, a slow, hard, steady applause, a sound I associate with house-framing. Tentative at first, localized, it was by degrees picked up by other members of

the audience, until this laborious applause thundered from every corner of the auditorium.

The third pianist bowed quickly and stiffly, with that familiarly inscrutable, sparrow-like expression on his face.

Meanwhile the usher busied himself removing the second pianist's body. He took it by both wrists and tugged until the hips slid off the bench, and with a flutter of coattails the corpse slumped concave. One black shoe caught briefly under the keyboard, until the usher whipped the body like a bedsheet, dislodging the shoe from both the instrument and the foot. The corpse was then dragged stage left, picking up momentum as it went, leaving a glistening streak behind it.

That immaculate, abandoned shoe lay on its side beside the *sostenuto* pedal.

Watching the second pianist's single stocking foot quavering as the body to which it belonged was removed saddened me.

But the shoe! The shoe embodied all the tragedy of great Romantic art.

The usher soon returned for the second body, which he hoisted over his shoulder and fireman-carried stage left. As the arms swung behind him, trickles of blood ran out of the cuffs and the collar, off the tips of the fingers and nose and earlobes, leaving a discreet, irregular pattern.

The woman beside me followed this action assiduously through her opera glasses. Her husband, awake now, consulted his program.

I could swear I had seen the usher, while he was bent like Atlas before the body, remove something from the first pianist's coat and slip it into his own pocket. But at the moment I reached out to tug at the woman's sleeve, she wet her lips with her tongue, and my hand sprang back into my lap.

A few people applauded the usher, who nodded before disappearing again through the stage door.

The second man, the one I had presumed to be an undertaker, turned out to be a piano tuner, and he went about his work while the third pianist smoked. He tuned with such seeming gravity and near-mechanical concentration, almost with an air of fatalism, that I kept expecting him to turn to the third pianist and shake his head, as if to say, *This patient is lost.*

The lights came up and a few people stood and stretched, though the intermission (such as it was) lasted less than a minute before a bell informed us that it was time to resume our seats.

The tuner frowned at the bell and packed up his tools, and a moment later his gaunt frame was swallowed by the light of the stage door. Almost immediately the third pianist extinguished his cigarette under his heel and took his place at the bench. He removed a handkerchief from the same pocket in which he had had the cigarettes and the pistol, opened it with the practiced authority of a magician, and ran it once up and down the keys, smearing blood along the ivory. The action seemed more ritual than practical, particularly when he dabbed his forehead, leaving a smudge of blood there. His hands alighted on the keyboard. I braced for the shot.

Because, unlike the first two, he never got to play a single note, I am unsure whether to refer to him as a pianist or simply as the assassin of the second pianist. Yet, in all other respects and particulars, he resembled the first two: the bowed, stoop-shouldered half-plummet of a parachutist through the stage door; the combined intensity and aloofness of his manner; the total absence of hesitation when he stopped, drew, and fired into the back of the second pianist's head. And now the poise, the singular poise with which he rested his hands on the keyboard, the instant before meeting his death. I did not need to hear him play a note; of all of them, he was the truest musician.

In fact, I am convinced that he never intended for his fingers to strike the keys, just as I am convinced that the second and first pianists were also aware of the evening's program: that they lived, so to speak, in the shadow of the gun—as do we all, though they with infinitely greater consciousness of this fact—in the trajectory of a bullet fired at the moment of our conception, approaching unerringly but ever so slowly, or perhaps only from an unfathomably great distance, and whose whine we can hear in the silence of an auditorium when we incline our ear musicward. This and this alone explains the majesty of their collective and individual performance, as if each and all were involved in raising a cathedral. Who knows but that the first pianist only practiced the first twenty bars of the *Hammerklavier*, and yet he took the bullet as if he were convinced he would play the entire sonata, and play it again and again in concerts for years to come. How else to explain the aplomb with which the second pianist assumed the first's labor, and the equally catastrophic ease with which he accepted his demise? Who knows how long they had spent rehearsing their deaths in and through that monumental sonata?

As if he had had a sudden change of heart, the third pianist, assassin of the second, drew his hands away from the keyboard and rested them palms up in his lap. The woman gripped her glasses yet more tightly; her husband flipped madly through his

program; the shot rang in my ears. Then the third pianist keeled left, crumpling as he rocked sideways, until his shoulder came to rest on the bench. His head lolled like a doll's into empty space; his hands fell forward, so that one came to rest palm-down on his belly.

In that moment, he was no longer a pianist, but a flower withering in the rain of a lover's tears.

I was shocked by the violence of the response. It wasn't just the applause, which erupted suddenly and simultaneously from all sides of the auditorium. The audience shouted and whistled and stamped its feet. And before I knew what was happening, several members of the first few rows, including two frail-looking women in evening gowns, had clambered up onto the stage to lay bouquets. I thought I recognized among them the man who had shouted at the second pianist, but I lost him as more and more members of the audience stormed the stage. Soon the piano looked like a catafalque, and the crowd was sufficient to raise the body of the third pianist and pass it into the orchestra, where it traveled on a manicured sea up the left side of the hall and disappeared under the balcony overhang. The crowd seethed in its direction, trailing the body into the hot New York night, whose sirens and engine brakes now penetrated the auditorium through flung-open doors and windows.

The woman beside me lowered her glasses; I half expected to see black rings around her eyes. She had started to tell me that it wasn't just the gesture, but the usher, the tuner, the brief raising of the house lights, the expectation of the music forever deferred, that made the final performance so clearly the pinnacle of the evening's program. But then she must have noticed the still-smoking pistol in my right hand, the missing fingers on the other, the smell of cordite in her nostrils, the gleam in my eye, the way my voice cracked when I said "Gesundheit!" even though she had not sneezed. And then I was on the stairs, running down and down their crooked spirals, past the exclamations of "Mon dieu!" into the lobby, and out into the carnival of traffic and steam. The performance had only just begun, and I still had one bullet left.

Craig Bernardini teaches English at Hostos Community College, a City University of New York school in the Bronx. His stories have appeared in *Cimarron Review*, *Zone 3*, *Washington Square*, and *Memorious*. He blogs about music at Helldriver's Pit Stop, on the CUNY Academic Commons.